Microhistory: Online study during lockdown, a unique Hungarian initiative, its relevance for South Africa, and an attendee's experience

Christo Engelbrecht

14 February 2021

christoengelbrecht01@gmail.com

http://independent.academia.edu/ChristoEngelbrecht

Abstract

What is arguably the first international online PhD-level microhistory course *outcomes*, are relevant for local and regional histories in South Africa. Drawing on the epistemology and methodology of microhistory's gains of almost five decades now, can, for instance, also subject widespread systemic fraud, corruption, and money laundering in South Africa to intensive historical investigation (or, as Giovanni Levi[1] did with the inhabitants of Santena), be applied to study rural South African settlements. Such "theory-building cannot claim privileged immunity from empirically-grounded critiques",[2] since research outcomes about rural settlements will to some extent also depend on the politics conducted in these communities including their relative disposition to their natural environment. In this way, microhistory reaches far into Enviro- Micro-history.

These conclusions stem from seven seminars presented by Prof István M Szijártó from 10 September 2020 to 3 December 2020. As a result, it seems productive to make more use of microhistory from supportive, complementary, and non-conflicting research perspectives for South African themes. In addition, online teaching strategies that aid and cut across most geo-political barriers to bring global research time and space into immediate contact with international students, and in turn, can connect international students with world-leading academics, with cost effective results.

Through this course, microhistory has taken another step towards future online international post-graduate study in today's world as a single-suburb.

Keywords: Cross-disciplinary; Fraud; Local history; Microhistory; Multi-cultural; Peasants; Regional history; Sustainability science; "Thick" read; Village history.[3]

[1] G Levi, *Inheriting power. The story of an exorcist* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[2] Editorial: "History and Theory", *History Workshop. A journal of socialist historians*, 6, Autumn, 1978, p. 4.

[3] I wish to thank professor Istvan M Szijártó, Dr MPV Franco, and R Engelbrecht for comments on earlier drafts of this article. Despite their best efforts, the shortcomings herein remain entirely mine.

Introduction

By the year 2000, the cultural turn in most social sciences and humanities were well under way but were, already by the mid-1990s, ready for critical review. At the time, not many countries could, as be the case with Covid-19 today, escape the realities of critique. Responses and outcomes to both continue to be vastly different. But one universal outcome is that all humans already live in the global village's 'new normal'.

The business of South African historiography too, made important turns. Three are relevant here: the rise history-form-below; greater emphasis on local and regional histories[4] and recently, the outpour of publications relating to state capture, fraud, corruption, and money laundering. Whilst the rise of microhistory in Europe, US, and other (mainly) global-north counties, saw the fall of communism by 1990, and somewhat later, also the retreat of Marxism,[5] from the early 1990s, the hightide of Marxist historiography was similarly rapidly waning in South Africa.

'New history', meaning post-apartheid history (or more idealistically Rainbow History) became the meta-narrative of the new hegemon. The ANC-ification of South African society was already well before 2000 in full swing with roots of deep-seated systemic fraud, corruption, and lack of basic services delivery to *all* South Africans, now in retrospect, an integral part of the sad history of the post-apartheid African National Congress's (ANC) history – aspects of which *date back in the ANC to before the end of apartheid*.[6] By 2000, the fraudulent Arms Deal[7] for South Africans was

---

4 E van Eeden, "Regional, local, urban, and rural history as nearby spaces and places: historiographical and methodological reflections", *New Contree*, 63, January 2012, pp. 1-34.

5 GS Jones in K Marx and F Engels, *The communist manifesto* (with an introduction and notes by GS Jones) (London, Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 3-13.

6 See for instance: A Basson and P du Toit, *Enemy of the people. How Jacob Zuma stole South Africa and how the people fought back* (Johannesburg and Cape Town, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2017); S Booysen, *Dominance and decline the ANC in the time of Zuma* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2015); A Boraine, *What's gone wrong? On the brink of a failed state* (Johannesburg and cape Town, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2014); M Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki. The dream deferred* (Johannesburg and Cape Town, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2007); J Gordin, *Zuma. A biography* (Johannesburg and Cape Town, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2009); WM Gumede, *Thabo Mbeki and the battle for the soul of the ANC* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2007); P Holden, *The arms deal in your pocket* (Jeppestown, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2008); R Kasrils, *Armed and dangerous. My undercover struggle against apartheid* (Oxford, Heinemann, 1993); R Kasrils, *A simple man. Kasrils and the Zuma enigma* (Auckland Park, Jacana, 2017); G Ludi, *The communistisation of the ANC* (Alberton, Galago, 2011); A Mc Lennan and B Munslow, *The politics of service delivery* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2009); P Mashele and M Qobo, *The fall of the ANC. What's next?* (Johannesburg, Picador Africa, 2014); P-L Myburg, *The republic of Gupta. A story of state capture* (Century City, Penguin Books, 2017); P-L Myburg, *Gangster state. Unravelling Ace Magashule's web or capture* (Century City, Penguin Books, 2019); J Pauw, *The president's keepers. Those keeping Zuma in power and out of prison* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2017); V Pikoli and M Wiener. *My second initiation. The memoir of Vusi Pikoli* (Johannesburg, Picador Africa, 2013); H Douzemetzis (with G Loughran), *The man who killed apartheid. The life of Dimitri Tsafendas* (Auckland Park, Jacana, 2019.); J van Loggerenberg (with A Lackay), *Rogue. The inside story of SARS's elite crime-busting unit* (Johannesburg and Cape Town, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2016); M Wiener, *The ministry of crime. An underworld explored* (Johannesburg, Macmillan, 2019).

7 P Holden, *The arms deal…*

history, and worse, what became known in 2019 as the 'Nine Wasted Years'[8] (fortunately) now behind us – that was, until institutionalized Covid-corruption tsunamied South Africa in the first quarter of 2020 that shocked the country. Some argue it was to be expected, whilst others maintain that this pattern will be repeated when the vaccines do become available. This became fact.

The historical legacies of the above, nowadays dressed in the meta-narratives of state capture, already stimulate *new* 'great historical questions' about current South African society that will take generations to unravel. In less than three decades of ANC rule, South Africa is financially bankrupt as Finance Minister Tito Mboweni's mid-term mini-budget in October 2020 revealed. This is public knowledge. In addition, the ANC's intellectual bankruptcy now spans at least two decades in public discourse. On 11 November 2020 *Statistics South Africa* announced the latest official unemployment figures in the country that has increased in excess of 43%. A day later former President Jacob Zuma walked *out of his own application proceedings* wanting Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo to recuse himself as chairman of the Commission's inquiry into state capture, thus publicly disrespecting the Constitution, rule of law, and flaunting his 'above-the-law-*mentalité*'. The following day Mr Ace Magashule (ANC Secretary-General) attended his first court appearance in the Bloemfontein magistrate court on more than twenty charges of corruption, fraud, and money laundering.

Against this background, this article is a deliberate statement to promote Micro-history *without creating additional contested research space or new orthodoxies*, but rather in a *complementary* inter- and intra-disciplinary manner amongst progressive likeminded members of academia and non-academia alike, with specific reference to South Africa.

On a smaller scale then, the purpose of this article is to stimulate interest in microhistory *praxis* in South Africa, but in a somewhat different way – reminding researchers about the myriad of *new* themes in the *now* age of the *new* normal that are in line with the "normal exception" principle of microhistory. This point of entry fits well with a definition of microhistory as being the intensive historical study of a relatively small object that also frames and answers 'great historical questions.' Social history usually regards problems concerning structural factors as 'great historical

[8] F Haffajee, "Ramaphosa's 'nine lost years' speech impress Old Mutual CEO at Davos", *fin24*, January 2019 (available at https://www.news24.com/fin24/economy/south-africa/ramaphosas-nine-lost-years-speech-impresses-old-mutual-ceo-at-davos-20190124, as accessed on 21 November 2020).

questions" – for Szijártó for instance, "[c]olonialism, globalization and Shakespeare's art are more generally ranked among 'great historical questions' as the problems linked to a particular community.'' [9] Incidentally, in my view, CFJ Muller asked in 1979 the following "great historical question": "How did the few South African Whites acquire their power, and consequently become so important on the continent of Africa and in the international sphere?".[10] Of relevance is that these introductory propositions are either true or false and microhistory can assist to bring out practical advantages in establishing or assist to establish their authenticity.

The seminar proper

In April 2020, Szijártó announced on the website for Microhistory Network the Course home-page: www.szijarto.elte.hu/Online2020.htm,[11] with details of a fee free course (code: BTKD-TÖ-), 'Introduction into Microhistory', designed for Hungarian PhD history candidates. Of the maximum number of students that could be accommodated, two places were reserved for PhD students of Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. It also turned out that gender attendance in the seminar was equally split. The uniqueness of this initiative (and microhistory always look *for*, or *at* the unique, the *atypical*, the *outlier* or *exceptional normal*), is the international scope envisaged (and achieved) for, and by, this course. Finally, eight attendees from across the world made up the participating group (Finland, Hungary, India, Norway, Russia, South Africa, and USA). Given, international cross-disciplinarity with a multi-cultural composition must make this course an agent for reducing the size of our global village even further, I realized.

Since this course was characterised by cross-cultural and inter- and intra-continental representation, it achieved a further microhistorical characteristic, namely, that it branches out very far.[12] This does not only mean across large geo-political distances. Such would be a traditional read of Szijártó's definition of microhistory. In order to "test the water" for anticipated attendance (preliminary responses in terms of interest) applications closed on 30 August 2020.

---

[9] SG Magnusson and IM Szijártó, *What is microhistory? Theory and practice* (London and New York, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2013), p. 6.

[10] CFJ Muller, *Five hundred years. A history of South Africa* (Pretoria and Cape Town, Academia, 1980), p. xii.

[11] IM Szijártó, "Introduction to microhistory" (available at http://szijarto.web.elte.hu/Online2020.htm, as accessed on 30 April 2020).

[12] IM Szijártó, "Four arguments for microhistory", *Rethinking History* (MINIATURES), 6(2) (available at https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.579.784&rep=rep1&type=pdf, as accessed on 24 January 2017), p. 209.

Whilst Szijártó has been teaching microhistory since the mid-1990s, the educational objectives for *this* seminar were,

> *intended as an introduction into microhistory in English for an international group of students. While designed for Hungarian PhD students as a usual PhD course following the rules and customs valid in Hungary (14 study weeks, 180-minute seminars once a fortnight. 10 ECTS credits), it is open for other students, too. The language of tuition is English and classes are held online. In the classes, both classical and recently published works of microhistory will be discussed in a comparative perspective, and questions about the theory of microhistory will also be touched upon.*[13]

In the first seminar (on 10 September 2020), Zoom.us was the preferred platform of communication. The 'house rules' were set out together with other minor administrative requirements (everything was already taken care of and made student-friendly) and in this often gender-disrespectful age, the 'ladies first' principle applied, including keeping to time-limits, and addressing each other as 'colleague' or on a first name basis – no need for hierarchical structuring of academic space. Attendees were afforded equal time to introduce themselves to the group, as did Szijártó.

This seminar dealt with *what* microhistory is, the *where,* and from *when?* including its relative disposition to other branches of history (cultural and social, global etc) which made intellectual awareness and tolerance, and presence of mind assumed required skills. It soon became clear that *it is not that microhistory is distinguished from other histories by its subject matter, but rather by its methods*. So, when we were settling into the above, I thought of South Africa at a time in the history of our country when #FeesMust/Fall, #Rodes/Must/Fall, when more than 100 schools were vandalized (including being burnt down), dozens of heavy trucks transporting consumer goods that were hijacked and torched in broad daylight, when gender based violence is at its worst levels in the history of the country, and Covid-19 related fraud and corruption arguably the highest in the world, to name a few, I wondered where will all the micro-historians come from to study all this in conjunction with other sciences? At the end of the first seminar, one could sense that this would be a most interesting fourteen weeks – another of Szijártó's principles of microhistory.

[13] IM Szijártó, "Introduction to microhistory" (available at http://szijarto.web.elte.hu/Online2020.htm, as accessed on 30 April 2020).

Two weeks later, Szijártó first dealt with Carlo Ginzburg's classic: *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* and in the second half of the seminar with Giovanni Levi's *The Inheritance of Power: The Story of an Exorcist*. From *The Cheese and the Worms*, Ginzburg's view that "[a]ccess to the past is always mediated, and, thus, always partial" and by "definition perfectible",[14] led me to Hans Renders who argued that "[t]here are numerous examples that show that dominant historical narrative must be put in perspective",[15] if not corrected.[16] It is for this reason (above) that I made the references to aspects of post-apartheid socio-historical challenges in South Africa.[17] I also recall that during my second read in preparation for Giovanni Levi's *Inheriting Power*,[18] I underlined (in bold) Levi's references to hypotheses as being "hypothesis confirming". Levi explained how his intense study of "a minuscule segment of Piedmont in the 1600s" enabled him "to reconstruct the biographies of all the inhabitants of the village of Santena who left traces in documents."[19] Levi's analysis goes to the heart of an important debate in microhistory: Can the intense study of a small subject have explanatory power on a macro-level?

The third seminar dealt with two micro-historical books by non-Italian historians: Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie[20] (French) and Natalie Zemon Davis[21] (American). In his study of Montaillou (a small village during the 1600s in the Pyrenees near the border with Spain), Le Roy Ladurie's specific objective was to understand the peasants themselves. In his view

> *the best way to understand Montaillou is to abandon temporarily the problems of social stratification within it and go straight to the basic cell which, multiplies a few dozen times, went to make up the village. This basic cell was none other than the peasant family, embodied in the permanence of a house […] called an ostal.*[22]

---

[14] C Ginzburg, *The cheese and the worms. The cosmos of a sixteenth-century miller* (translated by John and AC Tedesci, with a new preface), (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013)., p. xii.

[15] H Renders, "Exceptions that prove the rule: biography, microhistory, and marginals in Dutch cities", B de Haan and K Mierau (eds.) *Microhistory and the picaresque novel. A first exploration into commensurable perspectives* (Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), p. 79.

[16] See for instance the Editorial: "History and Theory", *History Workshop. A journal of socialist historians*, 6, Autumn, 1978, p. 2: ''The growing involvement of academics in labour history that corrected some of the biases of traditional labour history".

[17] For a 'corrective history' of the murder of prime minister HF Verwoerd in parliament on 6 September 1966, see for instance, H Dousementzis (with G Loughran), *The man who killed apartheid…*

[18] G Levi, *Inheriting power…,* pp. xiv, xv, 80-81.

[19] G Levi, *Inheriting power...*, p. xiv.

[20] E Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou. The promised land of error* (translated by Barbara Bray) (New York, George Brazille, Inc., 1987).

[21] NZ Davis, *The return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, Harvard University Press, 1983).

[22] E Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou…*, pp. vii, 24.

The value of studying this book lies in the application of the microhistorical technique of "thick description" combined with many direct quotations (often lengthy) from his sources, making the "peasants themselves speak", a productive approach.

During my note-making a day or so before this seminar, I thought about the applicability of aspects of Le Roy Ladurie's approach to study rural villages in South Africa – in other words, let the rural local villagers "speak for themselves" about their lives. It was only later when I read how Mary Jo Nye's "definition of disciplines can be applied fruitfully to other fields",[23] that convinced me even more that Le Roy Ladurie's approach needs closer attention, because it seems useful to study rural life in South Africa from a microhistorical perspective. To be specific, current systemic fraud and corruption is so omnipresent that even deputy chief justice Raymond Zondo admitted in public on television that he never thought it being so wide in scope and deep in intensity, that make it suitable (if not necessary) for micro-historical study.

At a different level, some seven years earlier, Szijártó explained how he and co-author Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon differ about evaluating arguably Davis's most renowned book.[24] The second part of this seminar went to NZ Davis's *The return of Martin Guerre*. Attendee-exchanges were quick, from various points of view, and with different understandings – no wonder that this hour felt shorter than usual. The discussion became more complex when Robert Finlay, and Palle Ove Christiansen's[25] respective publications were introduced into our evaluations. I was so focussed on a 'thick' read of *Martin…* that little did I know a next microhistorical principle was closer than expected. Davis argued at the time that,

> *we still know rather little about the peasants' hopes and feelings; the ways in which they experienced the relation between husband and wife, parent and child; the way in which they experienced the constraints and possibilities in their lives. We often think of peasants as not having had much in the way of choices, but is this in fact true? Did individual villagers ever try to fashion their lives in unusual and unexpected ways?*[26]

---

[23] H Paul, "A loosely knit network: philosophy of history after Hayden Whyte", *Journal of the Philosophy History*, 13, 2019, pp. 3-4 (available at https://www.academia.edu/38508945/A_Loosely_Knit_Network_Philosophy_of_History_After_Hayden_White_Journal_of_the_Philosophy_of_History_2019_, as accessed on 8 December 2020), pp. 3-20.

[24] SG Magnússon and IM Szijártó, *What is microhistory?...,* p. 9.

[25] R Finlay, "Refashioning of Martin Guerre". AHR Forum: The return of Martin Guerre, *The American Historical Review*, 93(3), June 1988, pp. 553-571 (available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/1868102, as accessed on 30 September 2020); PO Christiansen, "Construction and consumption of the past. From 'Montaillou' to 'The name of the rose'", *Ethnologia Europaea*, XVIII, 1988, pp. 5-24; ZB Simon, "Microhistory in general", *Journal of Social History* 49(1), June 2015, pp. 237–248. DOI:10.1093.jsh/shv/005. (This is an Author's Original Version) (available at https://www.academia.edu/13313813/Microhistory_In_General, as accessed on 30 December 2020.)

[26] NZ Davis, *The return of Martin Guerre,* p. 1.

This seems to me immensely relevant for microhistorical investigation of South African rural village communities: how can microhistorical investigations of rural village life, partner with other histories, e.g., local, regional, and economic histories, to come to grips with issues that Davis raised, such as: "whether they [people of the sixteenth century] cared as much about truth as about property.'' Is there room to reflect on the significance thereof in today's South Africa to recreate "a village for the uncertainties, the 'perhapses,' the 'may-have-beens,' to which the historian has recourse when the evidence is inadequate or perplexing?"[27]

The following seminar was on 22 October and the focus shifted to debates about the theory of microhistory. The seminar was different from the previous. Not only was the theme *theory* and *historiography* in the first two hours, but Szijártó invited Prof Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon as guest lecturer for the second part of the afternoon. For technical connectivity reasons I missed the entire class but soon thereafter received a recorded version[28] of the last hour by Magnússon. Afterwards I was given the opportunity to pose questions I intended asking Magnússon, to him via email.[29]

What is microhistory? is in two parts: Szijártó's Part I follows a geo-historiographical approach starting with *microstoria* in the 1970s through French and German, Anglo-Saxon, Russian, and Hungarian, amongst the main traditions. In addition, it also includes important thematic issues. Part II by Magnússon, introduces a different approach, being a 'more wide-ranging consideration of contemporary ideas on the practice and significance of microhistory.' Having no secretes about their differences and divergent views in one book, I found useful, despite ZB Simon's critique.[30]

This book, together with Szijártó's article, opens his conception of past, present, and future microhistory. For the sake of brevity, I will only mention that Szijártó reconfirms his conviction in 'The Paths…' that future microhistory (he terms it Microhistory 2.0) 'can be a very valuable «junior partner» in the cooperation with

---

[27] NZ Davis, *The return of Martin Guerre*, pp. vii-viii.

[28] I wish to thank Pamela Thompson for having made this copy available to me. Similarly, thank you to K Ilona; P Lantela; R Gupta; prof N O Østrem; D Zharov, and V Zheng, who, in one way or another, kindly made resources available.

[29] Prof Magnússon kindly responded via email to my three questions. I thank him for that.

[30] ZB Simon, "Microhistory in general", *Journal of Social History* 49(1), June 2015, pp. 237–248. DOI:10.1093.jsh/shv/005. (This is an Author's Original Version), (available at https://www.academia.edu/13313813/Microhistory_In_General, as accessed on 30 December 2020), pp. 1–17.

«macrohistory, then, microhistory can form macro-history-oriented history, too.'[31] The value of this view needs further investigation since my first reaction is that such cooperation can be applied to local, regional and urban histories as well – in essence, is of inter-disciplinary benefit. It might just help to declare peace with "theory wars". In the second prescribed article, Magnússon[32] dealt with numerous themes but I only refer to his widely-known concept of "singularization in history." He wrote:

> *it is my view that it is worth taking quite a different direction in the general practice of scholarship, a direction which I call ''singularization of history''. In this, I emphasize that the linkages between units of research and metanarratives are not only undesirable but downright dangerous, since the latter tend to monopolize the scholar's attention. Macrohistorical research is particularly susceptible to such dangers…'*[33]

In order to ensure clear understanding, Magnússon clarifies:

> *In other words, the singularization of history does not require historians to reject earlier scholarship, not to believe that previous ideological systems are to be cast aside without regard. Quite the contrary; it is vital to initiate a debate on metanarratives and to recognize that this debate has a place in the society in which we live. But the limitations of such paradigms must be faced, and the paradigms themselves should not be the direct subject of research. This is the heart of the singularization of history.*[34]

Regarding Magnússon's contribution, the complex relationship between contextualization and "local" focus during the research process forms part of the intense focus that Magnússon places on "[h]istoricalization…[as] a prescription for how singularization should be applied in practice and how best to promote its aims within the academic world".[35] Lastly, the extent to which the question whether singularization

---

31 IM Szijártó, "The paths of microhistory", FORUM: MICROSTORIA E STORIA GLOBALE (3) *QUADERNI STORICI* 159 / a. LIII, n. 3. Dicembre 2018 (available at https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.1408/94603, as accessed on 5 June 2020), p. 917.

32 SG Magnússon, "The singularization of history: social history and microhistory within the postmodern state of knowledge", *Journal of Social History*, 36(3), Spring 2003, pp. 701-735. https://www.academia.edu/5196062/The_Singularization_of_History_Social_History_and_Microhistory_within_the_Postmodern_State_of_Knowledge_Journal_of_Social_History_2003_, as accessed on 10 July 2020), p. 1.

33 SG Magnússon, "The singularization of history…", *Journal of Social History*, 36(3), Spring 2003, pp. 701-735 (available at https://www.academia.edu/5196062/The_Singularization_of_History_Social_History_and_Microhistory_within_the_Postmodern_State_of_Knowledge_Journal_of_Social_History_2003_, as accessed on.10 July 2020), p. 19.

34 SG Magnússon, "The singularization of history…", *Journal of Social History*, 36(3), Spring 2003, pp. 701-735 (available at https://www.academia.edu/5196062/The_Singularization_of_History_Social_History_and_Microhistory_within_the_Postmodern_State_of_Knowledge_Journal_of_Social_History_2003_, as accessed on.10 July 2020), p. 19.

35 SG Magnússon, "The singularization of history…", *Journal of Social History*, 36(3), Spring 2003, pp. 701-735 (available at https://www.academia.edu/5196062/The_Singularization_of_History_Social_History_and_Microhistory_within_the_Postmodern_State_of_Knowledge_Journal_of_Social_History_2003_, as accessed on.10 July 2020), p. 19.

in history is simply a "great historical question" on its own that microhistory needs to answer *for* itself, *about* itself, remains unresolved.

Professor Thomas V Cohen's *Love and death in renaissance Italy,* and *Roman tales: A reader's guide to the art of microhistory*, were the focus for the fifth seminar.

When Szijártó previously wrote that "[h]istory is, however, more than just reading",[36] the challenges therefore, to go further than mere reading, were subjected to a specific microhistorical principle of "thick reading", meaning, *intense* textual read. Thus, to me it seems necessary that the different cases which microhistory investigates, have one feature in common: the presence of some special state of mind – meaning a deliberate and case-specific awareness. Cohen's historianship is an outstanding one under which to hone such skills, "because narrative alerts us to the frailty of our knowledge", and history told as a story, "is an interpretation, always, by necessity" of the "pastness of the past; the textuality of the text". For that, "historians must scrounge out local knowledge secondhand from papers".[37]

These themes flow naturally into Cohen's second prescribed book.[38] It models his historical method that aims to change the limits of historical knowledge into a benefit by writing genuinely, and emotively, in bringing the long forgotten past back that in so doing, pushes microhistory forward. In a rather unique manner, Cohen offers a list of fifteen "First Thoughts" – apparent obvious ideas that require a second reading, re-considering of first thoughts (or impressions). These thoughts range from a distinction between microhistory as a discipline and microhistory as a practice; the value and necessity of archival work, to that readers are anchored in themselves. His principle of what, when, when, who, and why (the WWWWW-principle), and the importance of shorter sketches; the boundaries of the normal; the role of the reader to help fill gaps, and the researcher's encounters with courts – microhistory as a dialogue between the author and the original creator of layered narratives, to name a few.

The questions and answer session by Cohen, showed his personal interest in each attendee's "project", meaning current research, and commented with ease on each, as if he has been working with each of us for years. From his questions answered but also questions posed, it seems clear to me that traditional theory and

---

[36] IM Szijártó, "Four arguments for microhistory", *Rethinking History* (MINIATURES), 6(2) (available at https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.579.784&rep=rep1&type=pdf, as accessed on 24 January 2017), p. 210.

[37] TV Cohen, *Love and death.in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2004), loc. 195, 88, 116, 108.

[38] TV Cohen, *Roman tales…*

thinking is as boring as it is dangerous. Cutting-edge microhistorical research, as proposed by Szijártó in "The Paths….", makes microhistorical study far more demanding than the suffix micro- might misleadingly suggest.

In the next seminar the focus shifted to late-Renaissance: Edward Muir's *The culture wars of the late Renaissance; sceptics, libertines*, *and the opera*, and Guido Ruggerio's *Machiavelli in love. Sex, self, and society in the Italian Renaissance.*

Muir explains that this book seeks to understand a "moment in late-Renaissance history by re-uniting what modern disciplines of the history of science, philosophy, literature, religion, and music […] have tended to keep separate."[39]

Culture wars can be seen as competing men and women in a contesting intellectual community, but it is more than that. From Muir's focus on the diverse interests of Venice and its satellite university city of Padua, follows my contention that in line with Muir's methodology, microhistorical study of diverse socio-political and economic interests of different cultures in contestation in South African local communities, regarding specific phenomena such as homophobia, shared anger about lack of service delivery, institutionalized fraud, corruption and money laundering, gender based violence, violence at and destruction of schools, police brutality, lack of political will and nepotism, are in urgent need of microhistorical study. In other words, since these propositions are either true or false, they have some practical advantages. Muir's study that brings contradictions, societal and individual doubt, and anxiety of unbearable levels[40] to the reader, is no different from what can be explored in South Africa. This is, of course, if we see ourselves as "a small republic of letters".

The next book's eight chapters[41] each analyzes a different aspect of the relationship between sex, self, and society, also deals with different aspects of masculine identity. In doing so, Guido Ruggiero goes against the grain of consensus amongst historians and literary critics that there was one form of individual identity and almost no sexual identity before the modern period. It is impossible to give a satisfactory comment about *Machiavelli in Love…* in the space available, hence the following (rather long) citation will have to suffice. Ruggiero wrote:

---

[39] E Muir, *Culture wars…*, loc. 44.

[40] E Muir, *Culture wars…*, loc. 61, 64, 66.

[41] G Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in love. Sex, self, and society in the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.)

> *[I]f my hypothesis about the Renaissance is correct, sexual identity and identity more broadly at the time were what might be called "consensus realities": imagined realities, but no less real for that, which were shared within the various groups with which and individual lived and interacted, groups such as family, neighbors, friends, social peers, fellow workers, fellow confraternity members, and broader communities and solidarities. These consensus realities, as they were shared understanding within the group, were not necessarily tightly structured; nor were they the same from group to group. As we will see […] Machiavelli's identity as a lover had rather different meanings for the consensus reality of his family than it did for his circle of close friends and again a different valence for the broader communities in which he was known.*[42]

At the end of the book I made a note the margin of my preparatory notes for this seminar, that reads: "a totally open-ended book. Why?". My impression was that the attendees were evenly split pro or not for open-endedness.

The final seminar had lots installed. As in the case with Magnusson and Cohen, Szijártó first dealt with the attendees' immediate objectives before guest lecturers, Claire Judde de Larivière and Claudia Verhoeven, were each allocated one hour to discuss their respective prescribed books.

From seemingly insignificant objects such as snowballs and play, developed an interesting book under two conditions: the variety of actions "of everyday political practices for communities' institutional and political organization", and to bring out "Murano's social density", needed to study "the *popolo* well".[43] This, Claire Judde de Larivière explained, is not self-evident of how to overcome personal bias, and how to deal with gaps in sources without reading information into the narrative. For example, social and geo-political societal structures are sometimes sources of tension between workers in the local glassmaking industry and fishermen. Glassmakers needed to protect their trade secrets whilst fishermen had to contend with the reality that about 50% of the boats belonged to owners in Venice, only two kilometres away.

And yet, all inhabitants of Murano shared the same fragile paradoxical space of gossip, weather and climatological conditions, political, administrative, and judicial governance on behalf of Venice by a *podestà* who was rotated every 16 months and annual carnival festivities. Every 16 months emotions, tensions, and uncertainties

---

[42] G Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in love...,* pp. 7-8.

[43] C Judde de Larivière*, The revolt of snowballs. Murano confronts Venice, 1511* (London and New York, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2018), p. vii.

where heightened and socio-political frailties exposed when one *podestà* was succeeded by another, not knowing whether peace, quiet, stability, and formal and informal networks of interest would prevail.

The influential but unpopular *podestà*, Vitale Vitturi, was pelted with snowballs by the local inhabitants out of Murano as the new *podestà* took office on that day, 27 January 1511. Afterwards, the accused denied any wrongdoing; the inhabitants did however establish control of the islands central space, the *campo*; they took advantage of the day when passage of power bears political results and implications; *gondoliers* were there to protect their space; the inhabitants chanted, read verse, shouted, rhymed, and associated Vitturi with a dog (an animal of impunity and evil); corrupt with a bad administration, to name a few grievances against him. Still, it was also a time of play, pleasure, laughter; of little children making a racket, and collective expression, or, as Zuan dall'Aqua said: "I am here for the snow''[44] – but of course, this book is much more than my few sentences above.

In addition, in its context, the Munano "revolt" was a small event, yet some argue not without long-term historical insignificance since in the following few months, vandalism flared up in at least four places in Italy and intermittently continued up to rise of Italian fascism to the early 1920s.

Verhoeven's book about the failed assassination attempt by Dmitry Vladimirovich Karakozov on the life of Russian tsar Alexander II on the afternoon of 4 April 1866 that took the world by surprise, argued that this was probably the emergence of a new, modern political subject, different from all historic events of terrorism. Terrorists, according to her, want 'to act in a historically meaningful manner without delay or mediation. This is because of the "increasingly instantaneous experience of belonging to a community", secondly because of the "potential for renewal at everyday level", and lastly, "because terrorism is politics in becoming".[45] Despite the "huge gaps in knowledge" questionable investigations, poor judicial system, press distortions, emotional hype, Verhoeven arrived at "a factual understanding what was really at stake about this form of political violence". In Chapter 5, the heading: "So many things in an overcoat" (armiak), explains the notion of Karakozov's overcoat's strategic dimension of political struggle' and what it

[44] C Judde de Larivière, *The revolt of snowballs*…, p. 135.

[45] C Verhoeven, *The odd man Karakozov. Imperial Russia, modernity and the birth of terrorism* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2009), pp. 6-7.

symbolizes: a new type of irregular political struggle; a new type of enemy; an undetected enemy; nothing seems as it seems; succeeding in the politicizing of the entire Russian life; an event possibly anachronistic by fifteen years; speech that does not match dress-code; and careless appearance, amongst many more. Similarly, Chapter 7, "The head of tsaricide", for instance, requires the same "close read" to unlock the story, in order not to neglect the impact of Dostoevsky's character, the 27-year old impoverished student Rodion Raskolnikov, who was arrested for "[m]eeting to discuss Western ideas and Western books".[46]

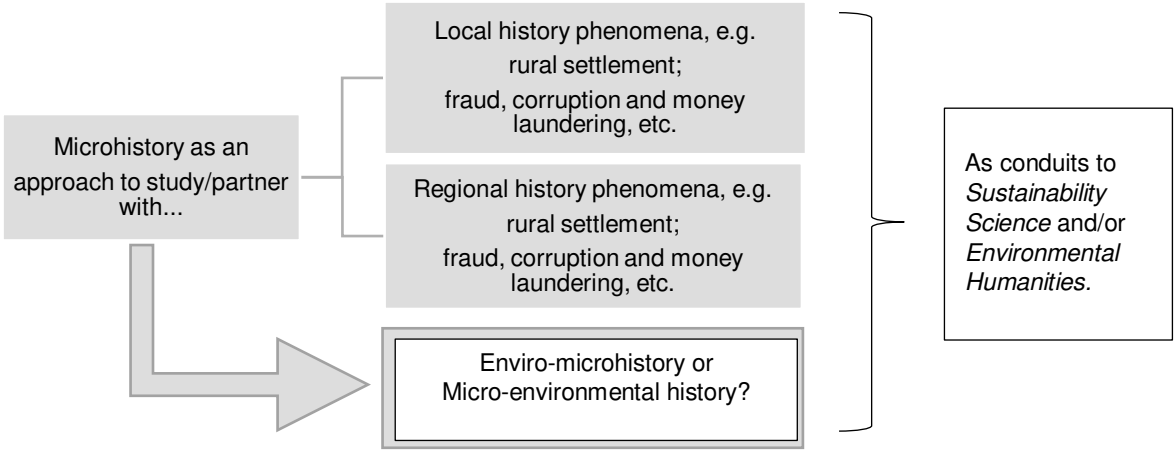
But Karakozov's act of terror does not stem from an irrational mind. Instead,

> *we might say, Karakozov's application of scientific expertise and clinical experience to politics leads to a turning away from treating symptoms and toward a decision to commit to radical and if need be relentlessly repetitions shock treatment designed to eliminate the cause of the disease that is ailing the body politic. Terrorism, therefore, is regicide reproduced in the age of science.*[47]

This leads to the following important distinction: whereas the assassin attacks the king, the terrorist attacks the kingdom,[48] I thought about how this relates to prime minister HF Verwoerd's assassination in parliament shortly after 14:00 on 6 September 1966.

Conclusion

The following simplistic representation must serve as an overview:


Microhistory as an approach to study/partner with...
Local history phenomena, e.g.
rural settlement;
fraud, corruption and money laundering, etc.
Regional history phenomena, e.g.
rural settlement;
fraud, corruption and money laundering, etc.
Enviro-microhistory or Micro-environmental history?
As conduits to *Sustainability Science* and/or *Environmental Humanities.*

[46] F Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (Bickels Yard, Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2020), p. 7.

[47] C Verhoeven, *The odd man Karakozov…*, p. 148.

[48] C Verhoeven, *The odd man Karakozov…*, p. 175.

This online PhD-level seminar about microhistory for international students, in terms of course design, accompanying administrative arrangements, content, and presentation, represents a model that is relevant and pliable for South African historical studies specifically because of microhistory's close proximity to local and regional history, without forgetting enviro-microhistory, as a conduit towards *sustainability science,*[49] because ''[w]e can no longer afford to imagine that historians' research practices have no environmental consequences.''[50] Imagine what the carbon-footprint would have been if this was an in-person course in Budapest?

International growth of microhistory offers positive gains for epistemological, methodological, and thematic renewal in a time when new paths for microhistory are charted, whilst growing inter- and trans-disciplinary histories, more humanistic social sciences, and humanities, are constantly explored. Microhistory can augment existing and future studies of historic and current village settlements to enlarge ideas of place and lasting identities, the processes of the production of the nature (mentalities) of local subjects through their practices, rituals, and forms of collective action.

The objects of such study are characteristically fragmented village settlers through analyzing territorial tensions (or levels of co-operation) between various subjects of a village on an inter- and intra-comparative basis. At the center of such ideas is the microspatial analysis to reveal the tensions (or not) and the experiences of conflicted relationships between, for example, lay, ecclesiastical and formal or informal bodies or interest groups that lead to a 'culture of fragmentation' (or cohesion) that impacts on local economic and political practices, and as a result making further contributions to the growth of local or regional social and cultural histories.

Finally, Microhistory 2.0 and Prof Elize S van Eeden's 2012 study[51] about regional, local, urban, and rural histories in South Africa, have more in common than so far explored. The outcomes of this course by five international specialists (Szijártó, Cohen, Judde de Larivière, Magnússon, and Verhoeven) who actively step on the new

---

[49] MG de Molino and VM Toledo, *The social metabolism. A socio-ecological theory of historical change*. (Series: Environmental history 3), (Cham, Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht and London, 2014.) Dr MPV Franco kindly brought this publication to my attention.

[50] A Gaynor, CP Leahy, R Morgan, D May, and Y Rees, ''Working paper on sustainability history. The responsibilities for academic historians in a climate-impacted world", 2020 (available at https://sustainablehistorywpwordpress.com/, as acceded on 18 January 2021.)

[51] ES van Eeden, ''Regional, local, urban and rural history as nearby spaces and places: Historiographical and methodological reflections'', *New Contree*, No. 63, January 2012, pp. 1-34.

path for microhistory, could only have benefitted the attendees. For this, Prof Szijártó, our guest lectures, *and* Eötvös Loránd University, deserve no small appreciation.